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ABSTRACT

Several reasons for continuing to emphasize literature as the "humanistic heart" of language instruction are developed in this paper. The arguments proposed are based on the following observations: (1) college teachers of second languages are trained primarily to teach literature; (2) literary study is a significant kind of learning; and (3) literature has traditionally been recognized to have an intrinsic value, and recognition of the need to study literature has been demonstrated by recent surveys of student attitudes concerning the importance of literature. (RL)

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"The College French Major in the 'Now' Generation: Should We Be Teaching Literature?" By G. Richard Danner, Ohio University. (Paper delivered Saturday, March 31, 1973, in Columbus, Ohio, at the spring meeting of the Ohio Chapter of American Association of Teachers of French).

Before launching into a defense of the teaching of literature to undergraduate French majors, I would like to tell you what my affirmative stand on this issue does not mean. In the first place, it does not mean that I advocate totally abolishing instruction in the basic language skills. The student with a bachelor's degree in French should meet several standards. In addition to being able to read, with minimal use of a dictionary, almost any text in modern French that is placed before him, he should know how to speak French quite fluently and without many phonetic imperfections; he should be able to comprehend the language as it is spoken by many kinds of speakers, differing in rate of delivery, accent and vocabulary; he should be able to write simply structured French comprehensibly. If possible, he should spend a year abroad as a participant in a foreign study program. He should be encouraged to take part in activities such as conversation hours, residence in a language house or dormitory, and departmental dramatic productions, that will enhance his ability to speak French. In short, I am not in favor of treating French as if it were a dead language.

What else does my affirmative position not signify? By taking the pro side of this topic, I am not suggesting that literature should be taught to the exclusion of civilization and culture. It is important that we turn out majors with at least an elementary grasp of the most significant artistic, political, social and economic developments in French history. But there is a limit to what most of us can do in this area. I hesitate to speak for those whose background may be considerably broader than my own, but I think it is generally true that college and university French departments are composed of people who have been trained primarily in French language and literature (sometimes, of course, in combination with other foreign languages and literatures). The typical French staff is capable of offering a perfectly respectable one-year French civilization course. But such a staff would probably find it difficult to expand into more specialized fields, such as individual courses in sociology, history, geography or political science at the junior or senior level, though it is sometimes possible, by drawing on the resources of scholars in other fields, to develop interdisciplinary courses. But, allowing for exceptional cases, as a rule we who teach in French departments are locked into serving our majors a menu of language and literature in some combination, with an occasional side order of civilization. The basic problem, in devising a program of studies for French majors, is to determine a satisfactory balance of courses. As previously stated, I support the teaching

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of the fundamentals of the French language. It would be unthinkable to send off to the job market graduates who, when expressing themselves in French, convey their ideas in hesitant monosyllables and by frantically waving their arms. At the same time, proficiency in the French language--ability to speak, understand, read and write it--is a means, not an end in itself. At times I have the impression that our pedagogical pendulum has swung too far in the direction of audio-lingual instruction for its own sake. When in France three years ago as director of an American academic year program, I was surprised to learn in the spring that several of the participants were very disappointed not to have acquired a near-native accent in three quarters on French soil. Considering the struggles they had had with the French language in October, some of them had made truly astonishing linguistic progress by June. In addition, they had gained a valuable, if limited, understanding of some aspects of contemporary French society. They had acquired a deeper awareness of some of the landmarks of French literature and civilization. But their sense of these achievements was out of focus. Not that they were oblivious of the importance of these other accomplishments, but their primary objective, which had eluded their grasp, had been to speak French almost as well as their hosts. As we know, few Americans ever reach this level of competence, even after many years of practice. Skill in spoken French is of course a worthy goal, but the main function of pure language training as such should be to serve as a foundation for instruction in the humanistic elements of our discipline. Otherwise we run the risk of turning out, not enlightened graduates, but hordes of human pattern drills set in motion. In my opinion, a wisely structured college French curriculum will continue to emphasize literature as the humanistic heart of our academic field. Now I don't expect to be allowed to beg the question of the value of literary study in colleges and universities. Let me suggest several justifications, which may well have occurred to many of you who are here today.

1) First of all, there is the matter of our professional training. The fact that many of us happen to have a much stronger background in literature than in anything else is not the most compelling argument that might be advanced in support of the teaching of French literature, but it is a consideration that cannot be ignored. Intellectual recycling to a certain degree is always possible, but for the most part we would be presumptuous if we thought we could compete professionally with our colleagues in the history department of their own turf.

2) More significantly, the study of literature can serve as a very effective reminder that life in the computer age need not be reduced to statistical printouts, planned obsolescence and headache remedies. French literature, in its rich diversity, invites us to acquire an esthetic awareness of man and his universe, to participate in a process of discovery that escapes

the realms of rational and scientific knowledge, to learn that reality embraces the world of dreams and of the subconscious mind, to discover that two funny fellows in bowler hats waiting for a man who never comes may reveal more to us about the human condition than a whole stack of newspapers, and to find that at one time or another French authors have concerned themselves with practically every kind of problem confronting modern society. This is to say that in various ways literary study is a significant kind of learning, as important for the life of the mind as the latest surgical techniques may be for the life of the body.

3) Furthermore, there is a very pragmatic reason for keeping literature on our curriculum: many French majors will be able to put the study of literature to good use in their jobs. These days, with so many students demanding that education be relevant, the practical dimension of literary study is well worth emphasizing. Let me explain more clearly what I mean. What is going to happen to our undergraduate French majors? Some will go directly into graduate school. A few will take jobs in business, industry or government. Most of them will become French teachers. Let's take a look at a typical French major fresh out of undergraduate school. He signs a contract to teach French in high school. Who are his students? Some of them will continue to study French when they go to college. A few may even become French majors. Many of them, however, will probably not go beyond second- or third-year high school French. What will they be able to retain from this fleeting exposure to French? Regrettably, their limited ability to speak the language will vanish much more quickly than it was acquired. Without practice their ear will fairly soon cease to comprehend spoken French. Before long whatever talent they may have developed in writing French will have diminished as well. Of all the basic skills, the only one these students can develop to a reasonably high degree in two or three years of study and hope to maintain while living in a country where French is not the native tongue is the ability to <u>read</u> French. What is the ultimate value of an intensive audio-lingual program for these students? I am not saying that they should not be introduced to the sound of the French language. I am not saying that they should not learn to speak a little French and to write some basic sentence structures. What I am saying is that above all these students should be taught to read French. By this I mean French literature, not disjointed paragraphs of artless prose fabricated by non-French grammarians. I realize that French literature is often taught now in high schools. But judging from the performance of students who enter my second-year classes at Ohio University out of a high school French background, I gather that reading is very often subordinated to instruction in the other skills. Such a balance, reflecting the dominant methodological trends of the last decade or so, may be appropriate for students bound for post-intermediate classes. But as I have suggested, an essentially oral-aural approach would appear to have little validity for those whose formal training in French will end at the second-

year level. If such students, having neglected the spoken language while concentrating on reading, decide later to do additional work in French, they will surely be able, with sufficient motivation, to fill in their audio-lingual gaps. In the meantime, they will have gained, by reading and reading and reading, an ability to handle texts in any field that may interest them. Imagine how their college education can be enriched if they are able to consult original French sources when gathering notes for research papers in government or history or sociology. Even if they do not attend college, their ability to read French will be an asset, a far more valuable tool than the limited and evanescent ability to speak French they would have acquired in a conventional multi-skill course sequence.

Is such an approach a realistic possibility for the secondary level? Will the typical high school student want to study French literature intensively? A recent report of the Denver-based National Assessment of Educational Progress, entitled "Highlights of the First National Assessment of Literature," may shed some light on the matter. In this study, excerpted in the February 1973 MLA Newsletter, teenagers in two age groups (13-year-olds and 17-year-olds) were asked to react to this statement: "Literature is a school subject that is taught in many schools. Sometimes it is studied in English classes. It is important to study literature in school." The youngsters were to give one of five suggested responses, from strong agreement with the statement to strong disagreement. Only 43% of the 13-year-olds strongly agreed that it is important to study literature. On the other hand, 90% of the 17-year-olds expressed strong agreement with the proposition that literary study is important, and an additional 9% of them "agreed somewhat" with the statement. In other words, literary study gained almost unanimous support among the older pupils. Admittedly, this is a single study and it deals with the teaching of literature in English, not in French, classes. But there is no reason why these high school students' attitudes should not be transferable to the reading and interpretation of a foreign literature.

As teachers of French, our primary mission is, it seems to me, to present what we know about France and about what the French people have contributed to Western culture in such a way that our students will find the subject interesting and, spurred by their fascination, will want to learn more about it. Courses devoted primarily to French literature may be an excellent means of interesting high school students in French culture. As they acquire facility in reading French, they will be analyzing and discussing works that are truly worth reading and remembering, not lifeless dialogues composed to reinforce the learning of the imperfect tense or pedestrian passages about a wide-eyed American student in Paris. Naturally sacrifices will have to be made. We can't do everything in a relatively short span of time. If reading is emphasized so strongly, speaking will have to be somewhat

slighted. The students will unquestionably find it necessary to discuss in English the works they read in French. The teacher will quite probably have to conduct such classes to a large extent in English. But at least he will in all likelihood have the satisfaction of watching many of his students become very proficient in one skill, rather than poorly or marginally trained in four. Let me stress this: that such a course structure would be aimed chiefly at students whose intention is to terminate their formal study of French at the intermediate level. For those who plan to take advanced work in French, there should of course be supplementary classes emphasizing the oral language to a greater extent or separately tracked classes in which a multi-skill approach is used.

So far, I have offered three reasons for teaching French literature: 1) that it is what we are trained to do; 2) that literary study is a significant kind of learning; and 3) that, aside from its intrinsic value, literature need not be education in a vacuum for our majors, since they may use it as the basis of their own teaching. Before concluding, I would like to suggest one more reason for keeping literature in the French classroom: namely, because literature is, or should be, fun. In the face of declining enrollments, it is imperative that we give our students courses that are likely to be enjoyable as well as academically sound. Seldom have I taught a student who did not enjoy at least some of the literary works being read in classes at every level--elementary, intermediate and advanced; thus the classical premise of literature's capacity to give pleasure is being confirmed in our own day.

In summary, I firmly believe that literature should remain a vital part of the program of studies of the undergraduate French major. Removal of literary study from the curriculum would inevitably result in impoverishment, not improvement, benefitting neither teachers nor students.